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Social Change and the Reformulation of Identity Among the Forest Tobelo of Halmahera Tengah

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Recent anthropological literature has examined the ability, or lack thereof, for “foragers” or “hunter-gatherers” to maintain a cultural identity in the face of massive social change (Eder 1987, Griffin 1996, Povinelli 1993). These forces of social change include missionaries and government development experts who seek to change the way foragers structure their lives, and large-scale environmental degradation that affects their ability to continue foraging for their subsistence. This raises questions about how foraging communities create, or reconstruct, their cultural identities, their sense of who they are in opposition to others, in response to these transformations. As foragers become farmers, can they maintain their identity, or are they subsumed within or overwhelmed by larger farming populations? Are foragers completely at the mercy of larger structural forces, such as government development programs and timber and mining interests, in determining how they construct their lives, or can they maintain a degree of agency in deciding who they are vis-à-vis others? Questions such as these are of increasing importance in Southeast Asia as foraging populations are threatened by government programs that seek to dismantle their way of life, and by other forces beyond their control. My research examines these issues among the Forest Tobelo of Halmahera Tengah in the province of Maluku in eastern Indonesia.

Research problem

This report examines the processes of conversion to Christianity and resettlement among former forest-dwelling foragers on the island of Halmahera in Maluku. In particular, it examines how these two shifts in local lifeways have affected the cultural identity of the Forest Tobelo, the Tobelo-speaking forest dwellers of Halmahera’s interior who are com-

monly referred to as “Tugutil.”¹ In the past, the Forest Tobelo of the Maba district were largely ignored by both the early Christian missionaries and the local Protestant churches that succeeded them. They never adopted local versions of Christianity. In a similar vein, they were ignored at all levels by the Indonesian government and were not incorporated into the larger nation-state. These two factors allowed them to maintain both their indigenous cosmology and their seminomadic settlement patterns in the forest. Over time, these traits came to distinguish them from Tobelo-speaking village populations in the region. In the early 1980s, however, the situation began to change rapidly, as Western missionaries arrived and many Forest Tobelo resettled into villages.

In this contribution, I provide a preliminary sketch of these two major developments, and how the Forest Tobelo are reformulating their sense of cultural identity in response. My research focused on the community of Tanjung Lili in the Maba district of the regency of Halmahera Tengah in the province of Maluku. The New Tribes Mission initially began their work at the site, which has today become the settlement of Tanjung Lili, and is still located there. Tanjung Lili is also a resettlement village built by the Barito Pacific timber company for the Forest Tobelo, and occupied by them since 1993. Thus, it offers a particularly interesting situation in which to examine changing notions of identity. Before the arrival of the missionaries and the timber company, the Forest Tobelo differentiated themselves from coastal villagers primarily on the grounds of their shifting residence patterns in the forest and their rejection of Christianity. However, the Forest Tobelo of Tanjung Lili now live in a village and have converted to Christianity, but they are still adamant about distinguishing themselves from neighboring villagers with whom they share a language and other practices. The loss of their most distinctive markers has not diminished their sense of cultural identity. In fact, they have reconstructed both of these former diacritics in an effort to differentiate themselves from neighboring Tobelo village populations. Below I briefly summarize this reformulation and the events that brought it about.

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Who are the Forest Tobelo?

The people to whom I refer as the Forest Tobelo are the Tobelo-speaking forest dwellers of the island of Halmahera. Historical, government, and anthropological literature usually refers to them as the Tugutil (see Fraassen 1980: 136; Huliselan 1980; Martodirdjo 1991; Meite 1933; Safwan 1995; Taylor 1990: 34).² I find this term problematic for a number of reasons. The Indonesian government uses “Tugutil” to refer to any group classified as an “isolated tribe” (*masyarakat terasing*) on the island of Halmahera.³ As a result, some Modole-speakers in the Kao district, some Weda-speaking groups in Halmahera Tengah, as well as Tobelo-speaking forest dwellers in numerous locations, are all grouped together under a single rubric. To make matters more confusing, government documents (KWDSPM 1996; Safwan 1995) list several different groups: the Tugutil, the Tugutil Lino, the Tugutil Modole, and the Tugutil Biri-biri, yet nowhere are the differences specified and there appears to be no rationale for the demarcation of these groups. The missionaries who work in the Maba district now use the name Tugutil in order to conform with government usage, although they are aware that the people do not apply it to themselves.

The Forest Tobelo I studied have not accepted this externally imposed ethnonym and continue to refer to themselves in their own language as *o fongana ma nyawa* (*o hongana ma nyawa* in some dialects) ‘the forest people’. This is a significant factor in my decision not to use the name Tugutil. More important, the people at Tanjung Lili and elsewhere in Halmahera are extremely offended when the name Tugutil is applied to them and they refuse to be so labeled. They know of the name’s negative connotations, that the government uses it to demarcate isolated tribes. They know that this use of the name Tugutil implies they are essentially

²In some recent literature there has been a move away from the use of the term. In his dissertation on the Buli of Halmahera Tengah, Bubandt (1995: 61) refers to them as “forest dwelling Tobelo people.” While this is a step forward, and they are in fact forest-dwellers who speak Tobelo, they would take issue with their identification as Tobelo people.

³The Indonesian government classifies certain ethnic groups in the nation as “isolated tribes” (*masyarakat terasing*) which are “societal groups that live, or move nomadically, in places that are geographically remote and isolated, and socioculturally isolated and still backward compared with Indonesian society in general” (Departemen Sosial 1994: 1; my translation).

uncivilized and cultureless. Other people, particularly older members of the community, were unaware of the implications of the name Tugutil. Some even thought it applied to villagers.

The confusion surrounding the broad application of the term Tugutil and, more important, the fact that almost all of my informants found the designation offensive, has led me to create a new “ethnogeographic label”—much like Anna Tsing (1993: 52–53). I choose to refer to the people among whom I did ethnographic fieldwork as the Forest Tobelo. This begs the question of why I do not call them what they call themselves, *o fongana ma nyawa* ‘the forest people’. One reason is that the direct translation would also include forest-dwelling populations that do not speak Tobelo, such as Weda-speaking groups reported to live in the interior of the Weda district (Martodirdjo 1984: 259), while my research only concerns Tobelo-speaking forest dwellers. Other linguistic justifications for not choosing the term need not be explored here. However, it must be noted that no group in Halmahera refers to itself or to any other group as “Forest Tobelo.” I use it because I find the other existing options troublesome.

There has been no systematic survey of Forest Tobelo populations in Halmahera. Their exact distribution remains unclear and reliable population statistics are unavailable. Martodirdjo (1994: 116) cites a figure of between 1250 and 1500 for all of Halmahera—probably an underestimate. I was unable to conduct a census of the entire island, but in the northern part of the Maba district, there are more than 150 households, which would equal at least 700–800 people by Indonesian government estimates, which equate one household with five people. In the regency of Maluku Utara, there are several settlements in the northern peninsula of the island in the districts of Kao, Tobelo, and Galela. Teljeur (1990: 9, n. 13) notes that there are small communities located in the Gane districts in the far southern peninsula. The largest number of Forest Tobelo live in the regency of Halmahera Tengah in the Wasile, Maba, Oba, and Weda districts usually associated with the river along which they live.

The Forest Tobelo before missionaries and resettlement

Before discussing the effects of conversion and resettlement on cultural identity, it is necessary to paint a brief picture of how the Forest Tobelo of Tanjung Lili lived before 1982 in order to compare this image with the gradual developments that have happened since that time. Before the

missionaries landed, the people of Tanjung Lili were scattered in the interior along three rivers: the Waisango, the Lili, and the Afu. They had largely been ignored by the Indonesian government, at both the local and national level. No efforts had been made by the Department of Social Affairs, under the auspices of its Program for the Development of Social Prosperity of Isolated Tribes (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Sosial Masyarakat Terasing), to develop the people of the interior as had been done elsewhere in Halmahera Tengah (Huliselan 1980; Martodirdjo 1988: 20–27). In the past, villagers had made intermittent, small-scale attempts to get the Forest Tobelo to settle, but with little success. Some families had moved into villages for short periods of time, but few chose to remain. They inevitably returned to the forest, except for Forest Tobelo women who married village men.

The Forest Tobelo were seminomadic foragers moving throughout the island's interior and occasionally out to the coast for periods of time. Their primary sources of food were pig, deer, riverine fish, and processed sago palm. They did not have large-scale gardens, but they did occasionally plant small swiddens at various locales in the forest, which they would exploit when in the vicinity. These swiddens usually consisted of a few fruit trees, such as bananas or coconuts, and a patch of cassava. They had little, if any, knowledge of the Indonesian language, and remained unaware of the existence of a larger entity called "Indonesia." Those who had heard the name thought it referred to another village on the coast. The only conception they had of the national government was through their periodic interactions with police. The idea of "government" simply meant being arrested. Thus they feared any representatives of the state, a fear that has only recently faded. They played a limited role in the larger economic community as well, engaging in only minor trading of forest products such as *damar* and *gaharu*, and in occasional wage labor in the gardens of coastal villagers. I am not trying to paint a picture of an "isolated and timeless primitive," but merely to point out that the Forest Tobelo had been left on the margins of virtually all development that occurred in the region, due in large part to their own wishes.

In the religious realm, the Forest Tobelo of the Waisango, Afu, and Lili Rivers had refused to convert to Christianity or Islam. They still retained their indigenous cosmology, venerating their ancestors (*o gomanga*) and various other spirits (*o tokata*, *o meki*, etc.). Unlike Forest Tobelo populations elsewhere in Halmahera, such as in Kao (Martodirdjo

1984: 258), those of the Maba district had never been the object of organized missionary work before the arrival of the New Tribes Mission in the 1980s. Hampering the adoption of Christianity was the presence of numerous taboos, such as a taboo on entering a church, created by the more die-hard traditionalists who refused to go to church and wanted to prevent other Forest Tobelo from doing so as well. These taboos varied from person to person based on their affiliation with the individual who created them. While not all individuals were subject to them, a large number of people were, particularly those Forest Tobelo who lived along the Lili and Waisango Rivers. In contrast, the people of the Afu River did not have these taboos and occasionally attended church, even though they never adopted Christianity.

While my research focused on groups who have undergone large-scale transformations, many Forest Tobelo continue to follow a shifting residence pattern in the interior and to maintain their indigenous beliefs. However, almost all Forest Tobelo now have some interaction with the government, and most have planted swiddens for subsistence and coconut groves for cash crops. These groups are concentrated in the other parts of the Maba district, as well as in the Wasile, Weda, and Oba districts along various rivers.

Western missionaries and conversion to Christianity

Of the two major changes that have affected the Forest Tobelo, the first occurred at the end of 1982 when a team of Western missionaries from New Tribes Mission, a nondenominational, evangelical Protestant missionary organization, landed near the mouth of the Lili River to spread the Gospel. The mission team consisted of four families, one each from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Indonesia. They spent the next five years studying the Lili dialect of the Tobelo language so they could teach the Gospel in Tobelo. During those five years, they also engaged in numerous projects, which could be considered “community development,” including teaching Indonesian and implementing a literacy program in Tobelo. One project with far-reaching consequences was the missionary efforts to provide the Forest Tobelo with an opportunity to switch from a foraging-based subsistence to a horticulture-based one by providing coconut seedlings for people who were willing to clear land to plant them. They had 60,000 coconut seedlings brought in by boat for this particular project.

In 1988, the missionaries began to teach the story of the Bible, starting with Creation and finishing with the Ascension of Christ. Once the lessons were underway some Forest Tobelo began little by little to convert. Today almost all of the people who formerly lived along the Waisango, Lili, and Afu Rivers have converted to Christianity. Virtually all beliefs and practices connected with their previous indigenous cosmology, such as ancestor worship, have been discarded as incompatible with Christianity. Members of the community strongly discourage any attempt to reinitiate these practices, which are now considered to be misguided beliefs that they followed while under the influence of Satan. Some Forest Tobelo have taken it upon themselves to spread the Gospel and have begun proselytizing among groups still in the interior. Acceptance or rejection of Christianity is the main difference between those living in the settlement of Tanjung Lili and those still living in the forest.

Resettlement

The major change facing the Forest Tobelo of Tanjung Lili in the 1990s was resettlement into a village, with all the modifications this shift entailed for a seminomadic forest dwelling population. Before the arrival of the timber company Barito Pacific in 1989, the people of the Afu, Waisango, and Lili Rivers had already begun to congregate around the mouth of the Lili in order to be near the missionaries. Once established, Barito Pacific built a resettlement village as part of the Department of Forestry (Departemen Kehutanan) Forest Concessionaire's Forest Village Development Program (Hak Pengusahaan Hutan Bina Desa Hutan), which seeks to foster the development of groups located within, or next to, a timber company's logging concession. The timber company is responsible for the implementation of these efforts as part of their legal agreement with the government. As part of their agreement, Barito Pacific built a settlement consisting of sixty individual houses, three wells, a school, a church, an athletic field, and other facilities. They also began aiding the village in various development efforts such as providing tree seedlings and other seeds for Forest Tobelo gardens.

One of the major challenges of the resettlement project for the Forest Tobelo has been adapting to a new aggregated and settled village lifestyle. As mentioned above, before the missionaries came, the Forest Tobelo lived dispersed throughout the interior and along the coast, occasionally creating large settlements for extended periods of time. A people

who had formerly lived in small family groups prone to frequent fissioning, now find themselves confronted on a daily basis by numerous individuals. They have to work together to create a sense of “community” and adapting to, or dealing with, new aspects of life that result from living in a village setting, such as creating new ways of resolving disputes and participating in corporate labor projects. The centrifugal tendencies of Forest Tobelo communities had to be counterbalanced by new forces and ideas. I argue that two ideas have helped to suppress these former tendencies: (1) a new-found (albeit still developing) sense of “community” based on shared identity and shared faith in Jesus Christ; and (2) reliance on and belief in the missionaries, their knowledge of Christianity and what it has to offer for ordering their lives. These two factors have helped the Forest Tobelo adapt to village life and have enabled the community at Tanjung Lili to outlast many other attempts to settle the Forest Tobelo elsewhere in Halmahera Tengah (Huliselan 1980; Martodirdjo 1988: 20–27).

Reformulating identity

The differences between Forest Tobelo and village-dwelling Tobelo-speakers used to be obvious. The former lived in the forest and followed seminomadic settlement patterns, relying on foraging for their subsistence. They wore bark loincloths and rattan waistbands, continued to follow their indigenous cosmology, and consistently rejected Christianity. In contrast, Tobelo villagers lived in coastal settlements, relied on horticulture, had adopted Western forms of clothing, and had converted to Christianity at the turn of the century (Huetting 1922: 284). Over the last fifteen years, however, many of the Forest Tobelo have moved into villages, adopted western styles of dress, and converted to Christianity, essentially becoming Tobelo villagers, at least in outward appearances. Nevertheless, they have no doubt about their identity, stating that they are “one kind of people” (*o nyawa o fara moi*) who are different from other groups, such as Tobelo, Buli, or Bicoli. Despite these changes, the Forest Tobelo retain a sense of distinctive opposition to Tobelo villagers, and the resilience of this identity raises questions about the boundaries or diacritics that set them apart from other groups in Halmahera.

As mentioned, the Forest Tobelo refer to themselves as “people of the forest” (*o fongana ma nyawa*) in opposition to the people of the village (*o berera ma nyawa*). This polarity between the village and the forest has

been, and remains, the primary basis for their sense of who they are. This may give the impression that the difference between Forest Tobelo and village Tobelo can be seen in their patterns of subsistence and their location in space, but this is not the case. Although the Forest Tobelo have shifted from a foraging-based subsistence to one based on horticulture, the opposition of identities remains. Nor does the notion of geographical location in space apply in this case. The resettlement of the Forest Tobelo has removed the spatial distinction at present, yet the sociogeographic distinction remains: the Forest Tobelo are “of the forest,” while the village people are “of the village.” The identity of Forest Tobelo is not contingent upon the inhabited space of the present. Rather, to paraphrase Gupta and Ferguson (1990: 11), it is a remembered place that serves as a symbolic anchor for a resettled people.⁴

Religion represents the other major point upon which the Forest Tobelo of Tanjung Lili base their identity. Prior to conversion, the basis of this distinction was the dichotomy of Christian Tobelo and non-Christian Forest Tobelo. Now that a number of Forest Tobelo have converted, the basis of their criteria has shifted. They now identify themselves as more faithful and “true” Christians, in comparison to Christian villagers who (they feel) still mix older beliefs with the local version of Christianity. This notion of being a better Christian remains deeply interconnected with the notion of their having gone through a process of change—in this case, conversion. They can look back at their past, when they still followed their old ways and can point to the step-by-step process of change they have undergone in moving out of “the grasp of Satan” and into the “palm of the Lord.”⁵ Villagers are unable to provide

⁴Gupta and Ferguson (1990), in line with new interests in transnational approaches to anthropology, discuss the importance of place in fashioning or maintaining identity among dispersed groups, such as refugees and migrants. However, I feel that such importance of place has often been overlooked in more localized accounts of identity. Therefore, their ideas can also be applied to resettled groups who still live near their former homes and have not crossed great distances or experienced a diaspora, but who have been gathered together and relocated in a single place, in effect undergoing an inverse process.

⁵Most of my informants lived in the settlement of Tanjung Lili, which consisted mainly of people from the Lili, Afu, and Waisango River basins. Their views may differ from those held by people of other river basins who have not undergone the same transformative process, particularly in regard to religion.

the same type of narrative. The majority of them are Christians (or Muslims) because their parents were Christians (or Muslims). To use a Christian idiom, in the eyes of the Forest Tobelo, the villagers are Christians essentially because they were born into it, while the Forest Tobelo are Christian because they have been born again.

In addition to geographic and religious distinctions, genealogy remains a major factor in people's identification as Forest Tobelo. The genealogical basis of identity tends to run along patrilineal lines. If a man's father is a Forest Tobelo, and his mother is a villager, people generally consider him to be a Forest Tobelo. A man from the Afu River who married a woman from the village of Tatam in the Wasile district made this point clear to me when I asked him about the identity of his children. Growing up in a village and having a villager for a mother, would they be village people or forest people? Without hesitation, he insisted that his children were Forest Tobelo. Although his situation was uncommon—only four married men (out of 60) at Tanjung Lili had wives from villages—it demonstrates the importance placed on maintaining this identity. In contrast, when I asked people about the children of village men and Forest Tobelo women, they answered that the children were of mixed descent. It is important to note that when forest men marry village women, it is usually the woman who switches her residence, not the man, and this is a major contributor to the identity of the child.

Conclusion

This report has provided a brief sketch of the politics of difference and the social construction of identity as it occurs among the Forest Tobelo of Tanjung Lili in Halmahera Tengah. The Forest Tobelo reformulated the boundaries of their cultural identity in response to their conversion to Christianity and their resettlement in a village. It is possible that future generations may eventually assimilate with village populations as past generations have done in other villages throughout Halmahera. However,

Whereas my informants base a large portion of their identity upon the veracity of their Christian faith vis-à-vis villagers, this obviously does not stand true for those populations still living in the interior. The latter groups to a large degree still differentiate themselves on the basis of their adherence to their indigenous cosmology and, more importantly, their residence in the forest.

this is hard to predict and will have to await future research and the development of current, often conflicting, development plans for the region, which include an expansion of transmigration (Goss 1992), gold mining, and the establishment of a wildlife conservation area (Suherdie et al. 1995).

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